

5 Fundamentals of Effective Crisis Leadership

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We talk about leadership as being sacred ground. We impact the lives of others every day with our leadership behaviors. We want to help you show up as a leader in a way that is:

1. Authentic for you
2. Compassionate for others
3. Effective at advancing the agenda of your enterprise (be it a large enterprise, or a small family-owned enterprise).

A VUCA World

One of my friends and mentors, who passed away in 2014, was a leadership guru named Warren Bennis. He coined the phrase back in 1987, a “VUCA World.” “VUCA” stands for Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous. Fast forward 33 years later to today—and if it was a VUCA world in 1987, it is a VUCA world on steroids today. We need to be able to navigate this VUCA world with increasing alacrity and authenticity.

I have just published a new book, called *The Blueprint*. It is specifically designed to help leaders of all ages lift their leadership profiles in the midst of today’s volatile world. The premise is that in order to deal with a VUCA world, modern leaders need to build a leadership Foundation that’s anchored in a sense of purpose, values, and core beliefs, and then brought to life with an enlightened plan. That Foundation helps you weather the storms of the moment. Some of these storms are substantial—as with the COVID-19 crisis. So, we need to develop plans that can actually be executed in the middle of our cockamamie lives as they exist today.

The idea is: You cannot change your life to become a better leader; you have to find a way to work on your leadership capacity *while* you lead. We believe you can do that.

Most of us lead our leadership lives by the seat of our pants. In times of crisis, we need to become a little more intentional. This thinking applies to all levels of the organization, from the organization in its entirety, to the smallest of two or three person teams.

I am no stranger to dealing with big, hairy, audacious issues.

I have found that I need to become a little more intentional, a little more thoughtful, a little more anchored in who I am and how I intend to show up. Our goal is to help you find *your* footing in the same way.

There are five fundamentals of effective crisis leadership you must understand to lead people through challenging times.

1. *It is not about you; It is all about the people who work with you*
2. *How is more important than what*
3. *Clarity and connection are next to godliness*
4. *Communicate, communicate, communicate—consistently*
5. *Heightened transparency and gratitude will serve you well*

1. It is not about you; it is about the people who work with you

You are totally dependent on the success of other people. If you've got three people working for you, I would argue that they're probably responsible for delivering 80% of what you're accountable for. You need to have the confidence that they have your back when you're not in the room, especially in an on-demand situation and in high pressure situations like a pandemic. You're totally dependent on their performance to meet or exceed the expectations of your stakeholders.

In my experience, it's hard to ask anyone to be "all in" to our agenda as a leadership group if they don't believe that we're "all in" to their agenda as individuals. Spend time with, and ask the people with whom you work, where *they're* coming from. Make sure you understand their agenda. Show a real sensitivity to it. You won't know if you don't ask (because they're not conditioned to share it). Then search with your group to find ways to meet their needs while you're delivering the agenda of the enterprise.

The headline here is that as a leader, you have to do two things simultaneously. You have to be tough-minded on standards of performance *and* tender-hearted with people.

When I started in my career, the prevailing idea was, "Do you want me to be tough or do you want me to be nice?" And the answer is: You have to do both.

You have to meet the standards of the enterprise. You have to perform as well as you possibly can. Or you won't have the opportunity to lead for very long.

At the same time, you are totally dependent on others to have enduring success. The people you're leading have to believe you have their back while they have yours.

Think: How can I be very clear about the standards but also very clear that we care about people and we're always looking for the win-win that works for them *and* for us?

You don't need to spend a lot of money doing this either. You can find small ways simply by asking, and responding, and showing sensitivity to their condition. This is not a high-cost item; it's a high-touch item. But I would argue it's mission critical in high-stress situations when anxiety is at an all-time high.

Remember: It's not about you, it's about your associates. If you don't know how to meet their needs—ask—and then respond.

2. “How” is more important than “what”

We have a VUCA world on steroids with this pandemic. There is unprecedented uncertainty on all dimensions—in your work life and your family life. It's hard to determine what needs to be done because the “*what*” keeps changing. But you can determine a process for “*how*” you will be managing the *what*, day-to-day.

You have to create certainty about how things are getting done. I'll use a simple example at ConantLeadership. Our team had to go virtual overnight, just like everyone else. We set up a process where the team gets together every morning at 10 o'clock; they meet for a half hour, they get coordinated, and then they have side conversations during the course of the day as we're advancing the work.

Every day, they know there's a touchstone moment that brings structure to their day. They have to brush their teeth, get out of their pajamas (at least from the top up) and show up for their teammates. Our Chief of Staff, Mara Katsikis, runs the meeting and makes sure everybody knows what's going on. It creates certainty for that team. You need to create that kind of certainty every day for your team, especially when you're in this phase of a major issue like a pandemic.

My friend Bob Eckert, former Chairman and CEO of Mattel breaks these large crises into three pieces. The first one is the crisis itself. The second one is the transformation process. The third one is moving to a new normal.

In the crisis phase, he challenges us to find ways to create certainty about the communication plan and let everybody know where the organization is coming from. Be as transparent as you can be. Celebrate what's working. And be very clear about what's not working. It's amazing if you get a little organized around this concept, how efficient and effective you can be. Your meetings can simply cover:

- What's working?
- What's not?
- What do we need to do?

Another idea was brought to mind by Bill George, former Chairman and CEO of Medtronic, and teacher of leadership at Harvard Business School. He has highlighted the importance of connecting your team to the higher purpose of the enterprise. Even if some strategies have been thrown out the window because of all the change, the purpose should remain intact. Every day, you should help your employees connect to that sense of purpose. Reaffirm the values you have for working together. If you cover them once a day, all of a sudden, you're creating certainty around it. That will enable people to focus on their jobs and not on the anxiety of what they don't know.

3. Clarity and connection are next to godliness

The Gallup Organization does important survey work gathering data about what makes employees stay engaged. It shows—and we affirm this—that clarity is mission-critical in any situation, and particularly in a crisis.

If there is a clear agenda, people know what to do. Then they can follow it. If there's not a clear agenda, the anxiety level will go up and the performance level will go down. The responsiveness of the organization will slip, and you'll be on a slippery slope to mediocrity. We need to be incredibly clear in the week, in the day, what needs to be done, and be open to asking people, "Do you understand, and can you play it back to me?" Clarity is the first piece.

The second piece is connection. People feel a need to connect. Now, people are virtually connected, but they're used to being more personally connected. We must look for ways to personally connect with them. I'll use ConantLeadership as an example.

Our team has a social hour on Friday afternoons where they catch up on their lives that week. There's been more than one virtual tour of a home for the people on the line, and they're having a chance to personally connect with each other. Historically, we'd be in the office and our team would inevitably stay connected with one another's lives vicariously through water cooler conversations. Today, you've got to consciously make room for it, and it then takes on a life of its own.

So, be clear about what's expected. And then create clear opportunities for connection that are adjacent to the world of work. Clarity and connection are next to godliness.

4. Communicate, communicate, communicate—consistently

A lot of the communications questions we're getting from leaders during this crisis are around what is appropriate and what is not appropriate to share with your teams. I say you should create as much transparency and consistency as possible. Tell the people you work with that you're going to keep them as up to date as you can. And then create a communication plan.

Bob Eckert, again at Mattel, in particularly crisis-filled week, said he was doing a broadcast twice a day. I don't know that you need to emulate his cadence of twice a day, but once a day would not be a bad idea. This is part of the structure you can create for others to deal with this crisis: Regular updates at scheduled times. Make sure to do it with consistency so people aren't wondering when the next communication is going to be released. They'll know when it's coming and that you will be as transparent with them as possible.

Obviously, you can't promise things you can't deliver on, but you can promise that you're going to share things as soon as you are able. And you can also commit to people that you have their back and that they're being well represented.

I find if you don't schedule these meetings with regularity, the anxiety level goes up and up. Don't keep people waiting or add to the uncertainty. Set a regular schedule for communicating about the crisis and move on with the day.

5. Heightened transparency and gratitude will serve you well

Whatever you tell them, your employees are going to worry about what you're *not* saying. It's human nature. You have to find a new gear—a higher level of transparency than you had with them before this event; you have to take it to a new place. Or as Emeril would say on his Food Network show, "You've got to kick it up a notch."

Heightened transparency will serve you well. Find a way to do it. It doesn't cost anything. And it will reduce the anxiety in the organization as long as it's authentic.

The other thing I will tell you is that most organizations are great at critical thinking. Most of us are built to solve problems in our organizations. But rarely do we celebrate all the things that go right. In a period of crisis, you have to also celebrate what *works*. You can't just highlight problems; you also have to celebrate wins. Say, "We're doing xyz right, let's keep going."

If you celebrate the actions that are making a difference in your organization, and you associate them with the people who are delivering on those actions, you have raised the level of trust in the organization. It shows people that they're appreciated and that you as the leader(s) are paying attention to the work they're doing.

Kick it up a notch on both dimensions—heightened transparency and gratitude—while you're going through a crisis. Create more clarity in your communication plans. Start focusing on how things are going to be accomplished, not just what needs to be done. Remember that leadership is sacred ground and it is all about the people. Understanding—and doing—these five things creates a platform that can carry you through this pandemic and well beyond into future challenges.

Now is the perfect time to elevate your leadership contribution in these five keyways. Try them. Be the leader people deserve for today and tomorrow.